

THE SCHEMES OF COLONEL CLAY

BEING EPISODES IN THE LIFE OF A MASTER ROGUE

By Grant Allen

THE EPISODE OF THE ARREST OF THE COLONEL

NUMBER
VII

How much precisely Charles dropped over the slump in Cigarettes I never quite knew. But the incident left him dejected, limp and dispirited.

"Hang it all, say," he said to me in the smoking-room, a few evenings later. "This Colonel Clay is enough to vex the patience of Job—and Job had large losses, too. If I recollect aright, from the Chaldeans and other big operators of the period."

"Three thousand camels," I murmured, recalling my dear mother's lessons. "All at one fell swoop, not to mention 500 yoke of oxen, embodied by the Sabbeans, under a leading firm of speculative cattle dealers!"

"Ah, well," Charles meditated aloud, shaking the ash from his cheroot into a Japanese tray. "Some antique bronze work. 'There were big transactions in live stock even then.' Still, Job or no, Job, the difficulty is much for me."

"The difficulty is," I assented, "you never know where to have him."

"Yes," Charles mused. "If he were always the same, like Hortimann's tea or a good brand of whiskey, it would be easier, of course, to stand some chance of spotting him. But when a man turns up smiling every time in a different disguise, which fits him like a skin, and always apparently with the best credentials, who can tell all?"

"Sey, there's no wrestling with him anyhow!"

"Who could have come to us, for example, better veined," I acquiesced, "than the Honorable David?"

"Exactly so," Charles murmured. "I invited him myself, for my own advantage. And he arrived with the prestige of the Gen-Eliahe connection."

"Or the professor?" I went on. "Introduced to us by the leading mineralogist of England?"

"I had touched a sore point," Charles winced and remained silent.

"Then, wouldn't it be reasonable, after a painful pause, 'I must meet in society many charming women. I can't everywhere and always be a guard against every dear soul of them. Yet the moment I relax my attention for one day—or even when I don't relax it—I am surrounded by a host of them, by that arch Madame Picardet, or that transparently simple little mix, Mrs. Granton. She's the best girl I ever met in my life. That hussy whatever we're to call her. She's a different person each time; and each time, hang it all, I lose my heart afresh to that different person!"

"I glanced round to make sure Amelia was well out of earshot."

"No, Sey," I respected connection went on, after another long pause, sipping his coffee pensively. "I feel I must be aided in this superhuman task by a professional traveler of cunning disguises. I shall go to Marviller's—tomorrow—fortunate man, Marviller—and ask him to supply me with a really good tea, who will stop in the house and keep an eye upon every living soul that comes near me. He shall scan each nose, each eye, each wig, each whisker. He shall be my watchful half, my unsleeping self; it shall be his business to suspect all living creatures, all breathing women. The Archbishop of Canterbury shall not escape for a moment his watchful regard; he will take care that royal Princesses don't collar the spoon or walk off with the jewel cases. He must see possible Colonel Clays in the guard of every train and the narrow of every path; he must detect the offchance of a Madame Picardet in every young girl that takes tea with Amelia, every old lady that comes to call upon Isabel. Yes, I have made my mind up. I shall go to-morrow and secure such a man at once at Marviller's."

"If you please, Sir Charles," Cesarine interposed, pushing her head through the portiers, "her ladyship says will you and Mr. Wentworth remember that she goes out with you both this evening to Lady Carlbrook's?"

"Bless my soul," Charles cried, "so she does! And it's now past 10! The carriage will be at the door for us in another five minutes!"

Next morning, accordingly, Charles drove round to Marviller's. The famous detective listened to his story with glancing eyes; then he rubbed his hands and purred.

"Colonel Clay," he said, "Colonel Clay! That's a very tough customer! The police of Europe are on the lookout for Colonel Clay. He is wanted in London, in Paris, in Berlin. It is Colonel Cauchouche here, the Colonel Cauchouche there, till one begins to ask, at last, is there any Colonel Cauchouche, or is it a convenient class name invented by the Force to cover a gang of undiscovered sharpers? However, Sir Charles, we will do our best. I will set on the track without delay the best and cleverest detective in England."

"The very man I want," Charles said. "What name, Marviller?"

"The principal smiled."

"He isn't particular," Medhurst he called at home. We call him Joe. I'll send him round to your house this afternoon for your own convenience."

"Oh, no," Charles said promptly. "You won't; or Colonel Clay himself will come instead of him. I've been told too often by too many strangers. I'll wait here and see him."

"But he isn't in," Marviller objected. "Charles was in as a rock."

"Then send and fetch him."

In half an hour, sure enough, the detective arrived. He was an odd-looking small man with short and standing straight up all over his head like a Parisian waiter. He had quick, sharp eyes, very much like a hawk's; his nose was depressed, his lips thin and bloodless. A scar marked his left cheek—made by a sword cut, he said, when engaged one day in arresting a desperate French smuggler, disguised as an officer of Chasseurs d'Afrique. His men were resolute. Altogether, a queerer little man than I have never seen or met before.

"He walked in with a brisk step, eyed Charles up and down, and, without a word, he sat down, and asked for what he was wanted."

"This is Sir Charles Vandrift, the great diamond king," Marviller said, introducing us.

"So I see," the man answered.

"Then you know me?" Charles asked. "I wouldn't be worth much," the detective replied. "I didn't know every body. And you're easy enough to know. Why, every boy in the street knows you."

"Plain spoken!" Charles remarked. "As you like it, sir," the man answered in a respectful tone. "I endeavor to suit my dress to my behavior on every occasion to the taste of my employers."

"Your name?" Charles asked, smiling.

"Joseph Medhurst, at your service. What sort of work? Stolen diamonds?"

"No," Charles answered, fixing him with his eye. "Quite another kind of job. You've heard of Colonel Clay?"

"Medhurst nodded. "Why, certainly," he said, and for the first time I detected a lingering trace of American accent. "It's my business to know about him."

"Well, I want you to catch him," Charles went on.

Medhurst drew a long breath. "Isn't that rather a long order?" he murmured, surprised.

Charles explained to him exactly the sort of services he required. Medhurst promised to comply. "If the man comes near you I'll spot him," he said, after a moment's pause. "I can promise you that. I'll do my best to get him. I should know in a minute whether he's got up or not. I'm death on a wig, false mustaches, artificial complexion, disguise to bring the rogue to book. I see him. You may bet your mind at rest, that while I'm about you, Colonel Clay can do nothing without my instantly spotting him."

"He'll do it," Marviller put in. "He'll do it, if he says it. He's my very best hand. Never knew any other man so clever at unmasking and unmasking the cleverest of rogues."

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